



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Vidas Secas (Barren Lives) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos
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VIDAS SECAS

(Barren Lives) Written and directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, from the novel by Graciano Ramos. 110 min. McGraw-Hill-Pathé-Contemporary.

Vidas Secas was already six years old when it had its first New York showing last year. Its simplicity and realism made it seem even older. Not because its story is "timeless"—the exploitation and humiliation of a peasant family from Brazil's Northeast is a contemporary and decidedly political subject—but because it seems at first to belong, by its restrained style, to an earlier period of cinema like neorealism, rather than to the "new cinema" that arose in Brazil concurrently with the "new wave" in France.

In the Northeast, Brazil's most exploited region, a migrating peasant family settles as squatters in a cattle ranch. The owner arrives to open the ranch; the family can stay if the man will work as a herdsman. In town on a holiday, the man is cheated in a crap game and loses the family's small savings. When he accuses the other man of cheating, he is jailed overnight for "assaulting" a soldier and then beaten in his cell by the police. His wife and son, coming from church in their new clothes, have to spend the night in town without knowing what has happened to him. Later in the season, the owner closes the ranch again: the man loses his job and is cheated of the compensation he was promised. Without lodging, the family has no choice but to migrate over the dry, hostile plain till they reach the city. The film ends here, leaving the family as poor and broken as before, continuing a cycle of wandering.

These and the other scenes (little, cruel episodes: in one, the family must kill and eat their parrot, from hunger; in another, their dog is ill and must be killed in spite of the child's attachment to it) are filmed with a directness that is disarming. If *Vidas Secas* is a strong film, it is because of this linear, cumulative progress. In every scene, the humiliation of the family persists, till it finally becomes perpetual, a damnation. The scenes in the *sertão*, with no relief from the sun's dizzying heat,

create a physical sensation of this hell: endless walking, dry ground with crooked, scrubby plants, thirst. Ending where it does, the film brings no conclusion to a cycle of misery.

The apparent simplicity of dos Santos's direction is the product of discipline. I would even say it constitutes a deliberate effort to regain the narrative simplicity of an earlier cinema, and the lucidity associated with neorealism. This can be explained by at least two things: externally, the source of the screenplay; within the film, the consciousness of the protagonists.

I am told that *Vidas Secas* not only "captures the mood" of the novel it is based on—i.e., that the novel too creates an atmosphere of barrenness, of the droughts that cause families to migrate from the *sertão*, of the misery of the peasants—but also sticks to the novel pretty closely, reproducing scenes like the killing of the parrot. I would guess from this that dos Santos's realism represents a sustained effort to come to grips with a subject outside the "natural" province of a bourgeois intellectual—the life of the peasants of the *sertão*—using the mediation of Graciano Ramos's novel.

(Of course, using the novel could not have been dos Santos's only means of breaking the barrier between himself and the people of the *sertão*. Between 1957 and 1963, dos Santos had directed no films, but did some journalism and made "obscure anonymous documentaries on the Northeast," in the words of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. *Vidas Secas* was his third feature.)

When one looks more closely at the narrative style of *Vidas Secas*, it is not simply objective after all. Dos Santos uses one device in particular which I think is key, namely the "subjective" shot, always "covered" by the perfectly familiar, "natural" cut from the subject to the object seen. The object is a landscape, or part of a landscape like the ranchhouse seen from a distance, or the sun in the trees. The person who is looking is always one of the family. These cuts occur unobtrusively, distributed as parts of the visual narrative. Even the dog, when it is dying near the end of the film, is the subject of such a sequence.



VIDAS SECAS

In one instance, as the family is crossing the plain the boy begins to faint. Cut to a shot of the sun in the trees, which begins to spin around. Cut back to the boy, who stumbles. The cut, inserting the sun and surroundings as they are suddenly felt by the boy, performs a narrative function. In fact it is rather a crude use of the "subjective" shot—for a film made in the peak years of "new cinema" and influenced by neorealism. To me it is proof that the naiveté of dos Santos's style is deliberate, sometimes even forced. The "subjective" cuts in particular, all the more moving because they seem so natural, serve to link concretely the consciousness of each member of the family to this dry plain that makes them suffer, the *sertão* with its trees and huts. Another reason they seem so charged with expression is that the peasants never speak their feelings beyond what is necessary, even to each other; and what they do is dictated by no "plot," beyond the ceaseless migration and destitution of their lives.

In fact it is a principle of this film's realism that we see virtually everything through the

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protagonist's eyes. In the *sertão*, the man's path path is crossed by a file of three or four mounted soldiers. One guesses that they are mercenaries, perhaps bandits; but dos Santos includes no extraneous material to identify them. All we see of them is what the peasant experiences as they go past.

I began by saying that dos Santos chose a "political subject." Actually what determines the exact ideological slant of the film is its particular form of realism. The film is a series of situations composed from—and bound by—the viewpoint of a family of peasants as they live the fate of their class. We are made to see, and judge, everything in the story through the eyes of the oppressed. The only glimpses of "Brazilian society" we get are hostile figures along the family's path: ranchowner, soldiers, local police: so many agents of oppression. Dos Santos creates the lived sensation of perpetual harshness, abuse, hunger. It is the viewer who takes the indicated step and "reads" such a picture politically.

I have not seen dos Santos's films before or after *Vidas Secas* (his most recent is *The Alienist*), but I gather that the problem of realism has challenged him from the beginning. According to one history of the "new cinema," dos Santos is "considered the forefather of the *cinema novo*"; his first feature was "very much influenced by Zavattinian neorealism"; and in his second, he "hesitates between two realisms, socialist and critical, trying for a cinematic style but not finding it, groping, admittedly in crisis." (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, March 1966.) The same article notes that *Vidas Secas* by its form is very different from the other products of the *cinema novo* in this period—the films of Rocha, Guerra, de Andrade and others, which have been called chaotic, aggressive, intellectual, obscure, etc. Yet *Vidas Secas* is the product of that highly *conscious* movement as much as the other films. It is the fusion of dos Santos's search for a certain form of realism and his knowledge of Brazil's Northeast, that unmistakable evidence of the ravages of imperialism.

—RANDALL CONRAD